

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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GATEWAY TO GOLD MOUNTAIN EXHIBIT AT HEARST CASTLE® VISITOR CENTER

San Simeon, CA – On Sunday, May 16, 2004, Hearst Castle® and National Geographic Theater at Hearst Castle is pleased to present Gateway to Gold Mountain, a traveling exhibit by the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, chronicling the immigration experience of thousands of Asians who came to America between 1910 and 1940. Ferried from ships to the isolated Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay, they were greeted by an America far different than the land of opportunity that many Chinese called "Gold Mountain." This exhibit discusses the attitudes, hopes, and fears of the immigrants, as well as, the discrimination they encountered when trying to gain entry to America.

The Gateway to Gold Mountain exhibit introduces the history and role of the station, as well as the experience of the immigrants who were detained there as they tried to gain entry to America. From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay, California was the largest processing center for immigrants on the Pacific. It saw over one million people through its doors. For some, such as returning U.S. citizens or foreign merchants traveling abroad, Angel Island was merely a way-station in a long journey. For many others, namely Chinese immigrants who were the largest immigrant group processed, estimated at 175,000, Angel Island was a harsh greeting to America far different than the land of opportunity envisioned that many Chinese called "Gold Mountain." Angel Island is often known as the "Ellis Island of the West." While the Angel Island Immigration Station operations shared some similarities with Ellis Island, the Angel Island immigration experience, in contrast, was shaped by the Chinese Exclusion Act—the only legislation ever to ban a specific ethnic group from entry into the United States.

In the late 1800s, believing that the country's economic depression was related to the influx of new immigrants, politicians enacted the start of successive legislation making it difficult for foreigners, especially Asians, to enter the country, attain citizenship, own property or compete in business. Angel Island was established through the federal legislation aimed at stemming the tide of immigration. It was known to officials as the "Guardian of the Western Gate". Because of the exclusionary laws directed at them, some Chinese immigrants adopted false identities, becoming "paper sons or daughters," children of American citizens who were allowed to enter the country. All Chinese were considered suspect and had to prove their identity by matching answers about their lives in detail with those of their relatives' in the United States. Inspectors presiding over each case had wide discretionary power in determining the fate of each applicant. Processing and questioning of new arrivals took weeks and sometimes months; admittance was never assured. With their chance at a new life hanging in the balance, feelings of loneliness, isolation, despair and doubt played on the minds of many who waited. For thirty years, the Angel Island Immigration Station stood as a guarded gateway to America, the Gold Mountain.

The walls of the barracks hold poems carved in Chinese as reminders and examples of the anxiety, depression, fear, and hopes that the immigrants faced. As first hand accounts, these poems take a special place in American history for their candor on the hardships of immigrants who had hopes and dreams of a new life in America, only to face the barriers of exclusionary laws. Nothing existing in print about the immigration experience written during this period comes close to rivaling the power of the poetry on Angel Island. The following is a poem from Angel Island:

*The west wind ruffles any thin gauze clothing.
On the hill sits a tall building with a room of wooden planks.
I wish I could travel on a cloud far away, reunite with my wife and son.
When the moonlight shines on me alone, the nights seem even longer.
At the head of the bed there is wine and my heart is constantly drunk.
There is no flower beneath my pillow and my dreams are not sweet.
To whom can I confide my innermost feelings?
I rely solely on close friends to relieve my loneliness.*

As much as it reflects the inner feelings of the new immigrants, "Gateway to Gold Mountain" is also a tribute to the pioneering spirit of all those who persevered and established new roots in this country. Their sacrifices and tenacity laid the foundation for new generations of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants to realize their dreams on Gold Mountain.

An opening reception will be held at National Geographic Theater at Hearst Castle on Sunday, May 16, 2004 from 5:00 – 7:00 PM, by invitation only. Gateway to Gold Mountain is on view until September 6, 2004 at National Geographic Theater located at the Hearst Castle® Visitor Center; hours are from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. There is no charge for parking or admission to the exhibit. The exhibit is supported in part by funds from Friends of Hearst Castle.

About Hearst Castle®

Hearst Castle® is an extraordinary hilltop estate built by art collector W.R. Hearst and architect Julia Morgan. It includes 165 rooms decorated with European art objects and 127 acres of gardens, pools and walkways. Today it is a California State Park that is open to the public for guided tours. Mr. Hearst's architect, Julia Morgan designed various structures at Angel Island. Yung Lewis, theater projectionist for Mr. Hearst, was a son of Ah Lewis who immigrated to the United States through Angel Island.

About the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF)

The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) is a non-profit organization founded over twenty years ago by concerned citizens committed to preserving the deteriorating immigration station barracks. AIISF's primary goals are to lead the effort to preserve, restore, and interpret Angel Island Immigration Station, a National Historic Landmark, as the Pacific gateway for U.S. immigration; and to promote educational activities that further the understanding of Pacific Rim immigration in American history. Donations made by the public visiting the exhibit go towards restoration of the Angel Island Immigration Station. Related information can also be found at the AIISF web site www.aiisf.org.

For more information, please call Dan Eller, Director of Communications at Hearst Castle® (805) 927-2074, www.hearstcastle.com.

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